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ABSTRACT

The employed woman often finds herself struggling to maintain multiple roles as wife, mother, and worker. Programs serving employed women's needs are a limited commodity in the United States, particularly in rural areas with a relative absence of human services. One approach to program planning in this area is through the examination of the structure of women's natural or informal helping networks. A survey was conducted of 250 female clerical workers in Las Cruces, New Mexico, to study their social support networks. Subjects were 41% Hispanic and 57% Anglo. They had a mean age of 34. Seventy percent lived with their husbands or mates, and 50% had children under the age of 18 at home. When they needed help coping, 76% of married women turned to their husbands; 44% of the total sample turned to family, 55% to friends, 36% to coworkers, 15% to supervisors, and 13% to priests, curanderos, physicians, or counselors. These women would like to turn more to professional counselors, and less to other family, children, and friends, but the discrepancies between actual and desired supports were not large. Anglo and Hispanic women showed few differences in their patterns of use of support persons. The development of formal services for these women must take advantage of existing support systems. This report contains 16 references. (SV)

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Developing Services for Employed Women: Building on Existing Networks

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Developing Services for Employed Women: Building on Existing Networks

Studies indicate that even when a women is employed outside the home, she still maintains primary responsibility for matters within the home. Consequently, employed women often find themselves struggling to maintain multiple roles as wife, mother and worker. Social policy addressing employed women's needs has been notably deficient in the United States. Programs and services such as family allowances, maternity leave benefits, adequate child care provisions and flextime have been a limited commodity. This has been particularly evident in rural areas where there is already a relative absence of human services (Johnson, 1980).

One approach to the development of services, particularly in areas that lack formal programs, is to understand the structure of natural or informal helping networks (Collins and Pancoast, 1976). Research findings indicate that certain behaviors, particularly those related to coping and use of services, varies according to the characteristics of the networks to which the people belong (Baker, 1977). Consequently, an understanding of these networks would be useful for program planning. New forms of intervention aimed at strengthening natural helping can then be developed. Many of those developments aim to increase

the availability of support or to improve the quality of available support (McIntyre, 1986).

Social network and natural helping are terms that have been used increasingly over the last few years. The central concept of social network is that of connectedness between a group of people (Ratcliffe, 1978). A social network "consists of a set of people all of whom are linked together but not all of whom know one another" (McIntyre, 1986). Networks vary according to their role composition, types of linkages and attributes of the whole network.

Studies of the natural helping networks have examined different types of populations with different types of needs (Patterson and Twente, 1971; Garbarino, 1977: Fine, 1972). Although some studies have examined child care helping networks (McIntyre and Lawler, 1979) and the networks of mothers (Abernethy, 1972), few have studied the networks of employed women as a population.

The Women and Work Study carried out by the author examined some of the problems and service needs of employed women. This paper will report on the aspect of this study that investigated the women's social supports, recognizing that these could provide an important guide and base for the development of future services. The paper will describe the study and report on the findings as they relate to social support. A discussion of the implications for service and program development will follow.

Research Method

The Women and Work Study was carried out within the city of Las Cruces, a community of fifty-four thousand, located in Dona Ana County, New Mexico. The sample for the study consisted of clerical workers. Administrative support personnel, including clerical workers, comprise the largest occupational grouping defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and constituted 29.7 percent of all employed women in 1983 (Norwood, 1984). Clerical work is one of the most gender-segregated jobs. In 1980, 81 percent of clerical workers were women. Consequently this group seemed an appropriate occupation on which to focus. A stratified random sample of 338 female clerical workers was drawn from the community. The strata consisted of three major employers in the community: the university, the city, and other establishments.

A questionnaire was designed in order to obtain background data, information on the extent of multiple roles, coping strategies, attitudes to work and family life, and service needs. The questionnaire consisted of 41 fixed choice questions. They were hand delivered to the women at their workplaces, and picked up approximately 24 hours later. The overall response rate was 74 percent; the resulting sample consisted of 250 women. The sampling from each of the employers was not proportional to the number of clerical workers employed in each setting. Consequently the data was weighed accordingly.

Characteristics of the population

The estimated mean age of the sample is 34; mean family earnings is $23,188, and an estimated 41 percent are Hispanic, 57 percent Anglo, and 2 percent other. Seventy percent are living with their husbands or mates. All women work a minimum of 35 hours a week and average 3.7 hours of overtime a week, overtime being defined as hours worked beyond a 40 hour week. Fifty percent of the women have children under the age of 18 living at home, and 11 percent are single mothers. For the mothers, the estimated mean number of children living at home is two, and these children have a mean age of nine years. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1. The income level is somewhat higher than the mean family income of the community ($18,538), but this could be expected from a sample that does not include agricultural or other unskilled workers and is drawn from some of the highest paying employers in the community. The ethnic makeup of the sample is very similar to the community as a whole.

Results

The Women and Work Study had four objectives: investigating the extent of multiple roles; describing some of the problems women have in coping; identifying self-identified service needs and examining the women's social supports. Only the results from the last objective will be presented in this paper.

The respondents were asked who they turned to when they needed help coping. The majority of the women who were married (76%) turned to their husbands. About half of the women turned to family (44%) and friends (55%). A considerable proportion turned to their coworkers (36%) and some to their supervisors (15%), with the smallest percentage seeking formal assistance from priests, curanderos, physicians or a professional counselors (13%). These results are summarized in Table 2.

An examination of the supports that the women would like to use, disclosed few discrepancies from their actual experiences. The major differences appeared to be that women would like to turn less to friends and coworkers and more to professional counselors.

Discussion

The social supports of the clerical workers in the study appeared to be strongly family centered. For most of the married women, husbands provided support. A previous analysis (Marlow, 1988) indicated that husbands, or rather ex-husbands, are still named by almost half of the divorced and separated women as a person to whom they turned for help. These strong family supports could in part be explained by the large proportion of Hispanic women in the sample, a cultural group that has historically stressed family cohesion and focus (Garcia-Bahne, 1979). Nevertheless, a comparison of the Anglo and Hispanic women

in the sample disclosed few differences between the two groups in terms of their use of support persons (Marlow, 1987).

Implications

Despite their multiple roles, the women in this study appear to be fairly satisfied with their support networks, and seem to lean heavily on their families for assistance. This does not imply that they could not benefit from formal services, and their request for more professional support endorses this. In addition, other results from this study indicate that when asked about service need, the majority of women stated the need for a wide array of services and programs from child care to flextime (Marlow, 1988). Nevertheless, the development of services needs to take advantage of these existing supports. Buxton's (1976) comment that "social workers in rural areas should learn to support existing systems rather than fighting them" would seem to be particularly appropriate for these women. Programs and services need to be developed that enhance the women's supports at work. For example, providing specific areas in the workplace for socializing with coworkers and encouraged brown bag luncheons on pertinent topics. The provision of employee assistance programs also has the potential of building more formal services on the existing supports at work. Although some of the women wanted to decrease their reliance on workplace supports, this may well be a

reflection of women's reluctance to acknowledge employment as a legitimate aspect of their lives (Neff, 1985). By formulating the support aspect of work, it is possible that women will become more comfortable seeking assistance in that setting and that this will lead to the relief of pressure placed on the family.

The family supports also need to be enhanced rather than ignored or displaced. Human service professionals need to be convinced of the effectiveness of existing supports. The myth of "professionalism" according to which only trained mental health professionals are competent to help people deal with problems needs to be dispersed (Broskowski and Baker, 1973). Indirect activities such as consultation, training and education may be more appropriate, particularly in rural areas where resources are limited, than more direct services, such as individual or family counseling.

In conclusion, the women in this study appeared to possess quite extensive support networks. Although this does not preclude the development of formal services, it becomes essential that if developed, they must enhance and build on already existing networks.

TABLE 1

Sample Characteristics

Employment	
Mean # hours overtime	3.7 hours
Mean joint income	$23,188
Occupation of Husband	
Professional	34%
Managerial	38%
Skilled	21%
Unskilled	7%
Ethnicity	
Anglo	57%
Hispanic	41%
Other	2%
Family	
Living with husband/boyfriend	70%
Children under 18 living at home	50%
Children under 12 living at home	37%
Mean age of children under 18	9 years
Single mothers	11%
Age	
Mean age	34 years

TABLE 2

Support Persons

		Who turned to	Would like to turn to	Difference
		%	%	%
*1.	Husband or mate	76	82	+6
*2.	Children	33	27	-6
	Other Family	44	36	-8
	Friends	55	42	-13
	Professional Counselor	5	13	+8
	Physician	3	0	-3
	Curandero	0	3	+3
	Supervisors at work	15	18	+3
	Coworkers	36	23	-13
	Priest/Minister	5	7	+2

*1 Percentage based on women living with husband or mate only.

*2 Percentage based on women with children only.

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